



## *X-Plain* *Irritable Bowel Syndrome* **Reference Summary**

### **Introduction**

Irritable bowel syndrome, or IBS, is a very common intestinal disorder. About 15% of all American adults have symptoms of IBS. Irritable bowel syndrome is an intestinal disorder that can cause abdominal pain and changes in bowel habits. This reference summary will help you better understand IBS and how it can be treated.

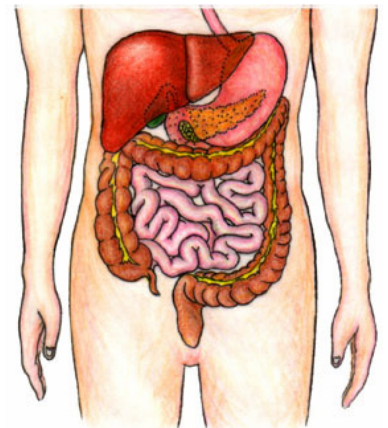
### **Anatomy**

The colon is the last part of the intestines. It is also called the large intestine. Swallowed food goes through the “esophagus,” which is the feeding tube. Next, food passes through the stomach, where it is partially digested. Digested food goes from the stomach to the small intestines, where nutrients are further digested and partially absorbed.

Fibers and digested food finally reach the colon. In the colon, the rest of the nutrients get absorbed and stools are formed. Stools are stored in the last part of the colon called the “sigmoid” colon and “rectum,” before being excreted out of the body.

The colon has several components:

- the ascending colon
- the transverse colon
- the descending colon
- the sigmoid colon
- the rectum
- the anus



The walls of the intestines have muscles that contract and relax to push digested food through. These contractions are also very helpful for having a bowel movement. Intestinal muscle contractions are partially controlled by the nervous system, but also by the food we eat and hormones in the blood. This is why some people feel the urge to have a bowel movement about an hour after eating. This urge is stronger after meals that are high in fat. Normal bowel function can vary from 3 bowel movements per day to 3 per week.

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A bowel movement is considered normal if it:

- is well-formed,
- contains no blood, and
- is passed easily without pain or cramping

## Symptoms

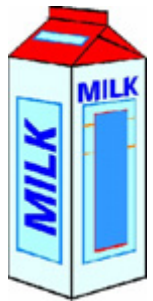
Common symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome include: abdominal cramps, bloating, gas and diarrhea or constipation or both. IBS does NOT include the following symptoms, as they could be signs of more serious colon diseases:

- blood in the stools
- weight loss
- fever
- continuous pain

Symptoms of IBS can vary, depending on what the patient eats, how much the patient eats, emotional stress, and menstrual cycle in women. Therefore, it is very important for patients with IBS to keep an accurate record of what makes their symptoms worse.

Some kinds of food are known to cause symptoms of IBS. They include:

- milk products
- fatty foods
- chocolate
- caffeine
- alcohol



Symptoms of IBS may be mild, occurring only once in awhile, or they may occur often. At their worst, the symptoms of IBS can severely limit a person's ability to work, socialize, or even to simply leave home for an hour. Patients may need to be close to a bathroom at all times, which could prevent healthy relationships.

## Causes

There are currently no known causes of irritable bowel syndrome. Factors that seem to produce symptoms of IBS include diet, emotional stress, and hormones. Patients with irritable bowel syndrome are NOT at an increased risk of developing cancer. Patients who have IBS are also not at an increased risk of developing psychological or psychiatric problems.

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## Diagnosis

IBS is diagnosed after other diseases that could cause similar symptoms are ruled out. A detailed medical history and physical examination are done first. Stool samples may be taken to check for blood and infections. A specialized test, called endoscopy, may be done to look at the inside of the colon.

Radiological tests, such as a barium enema or CAT scans, may also be needed. If tests show that the patient does not have a different condition, then the diagnosis of IBS may be made.



## Treatment

Treating irritable bowel syndrome includes a variety of lifestyle changes. Depending on what seems to be causing IBS, specific changes may or may not help. Decreasing emotional stress is usually a first step in reducing symptoms of IBS.

Changing the diet in various ways can help to reduce IBS symptoms. Limiting dairy products, chocolate, fatty foods, coffee, and alcohol is often beneficial. Eating smaller meals may also help.

Including more fiber in the diet can make stools more regular and help to control the function of the colon. Eating more vegetables adds a lot of fiber to the diet. Patients who are lactose intolerant may find that lactase supplements help to reduce symptoms of IBS. Lactase is a special chemical that can digest lactose.

Medications that relax the muscles of the intestines may also be given; these include anti-depressants and tranquilizers. Stool softener, or laxatives, should be used with caution. It is possible for the muscles of the intestines to become dependent, or addicted, to them.

## Summary

Irritable bowel syndrome is a common intestinal disease. Diet changes and stress reduction, as well as medication, can help patients with IBS to lead normal lives. It is important to tell your doctor if you have symptoms of IBS; with a few changes, IBS can be controlled and life can go on!

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